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ABSTRACT

This Digest provides a rationale for developing grading guides to use with business writing students. It describes the methods business communications teachers can use to construct and employ guides to provide students with quality writing instruction. The Digest maintains that teachers can construct either skills analysis grading guides and/or holistic scoring guides that will enhance prewriting instruction, guide students during the rewriting process, and facilitate objective and constructive evaluation of the written product. The two types of guides are explained. Contains 10 references. (NKA)

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Using Grading Guides to Shape and Evaluate Business Writing

by Nancy Hyslop

Every day several million business letters, memos, reports, manuals, proposals, and brochures are written, many of which are wordy and disorganized, redundant, poorly punctuated and filled with errors in grammar (Blake & Bly, 1991). Stephen Gottlieb (1992) traces 2 major efforts to improve business and professional writing and concludes that "the teaching of fundamentals of clear communication to future business leaders...is a very valuable technique for improving the flow of information from business to the public."

Unfortunately, the best methods to use to teach "the fundamentals of clear communication" remains a subject of considerable controversy (Kelly, 1991; Brand, 1992). Today, business communications teachers are charged with the responsibility of teaching students to use active voice, avoid long sentences, use simple language, break writing into short sections, use specific and concrete terms, and organize for grammar, syntax, and mechanics as directed by both Davis and Stohrer (1989) and Blake and Bly (1991). At the same time they are warned to avoid being too picky, too arbitrary and generally unhelpful. They are told that steady red-marking of errors will bewilder and frustrate students who cannot profit from an overload of corrections (White, 1994).

This *Digest* will provide a rationale for developing grading guides and describe the methods business communications teachers can use to construct and employ guides to provide students with quality writing instruction, while avoiding the pitfalls of assessment that White calls both "chaotic and unprincipled."

Rationale for Using Grading Guides

Although constructing grading guides can be a time-consuming and tedious task, guides benefit the business communications students in 3 significant ways:

- First, many students come to business communications classes today having been trained by English teachers with a background in literature. Consequently, these students have been encouraged to use complex rather than clear expressions, to work for a colorful tone rather than use plain language, and to write long, complex sentences rather than short concise sentences. They are more comfortable with imagery and symbolism than numbers and charts (McKeown, 1992). Grading guides provide these students with the specific criteria for effective business writing, as outlined in the works of both Davis and Stohrer (1989) and Blake and Bly (1991), not only during pre-writing instruction but also during the critical rewriting process.

- In addition, Edward M. White, in "Teaching and Assessing Writing" (1994), argues that "the educational purpose of responding to and evaluating student writing ought to be the same as the purpose of the writing class: to improve student writing." Grading guides provide an objective method of showing students what works and does not work in the documents they generate. These guides provide the kind of response that "allows the writer to understand and respect the reasons for that judgment" (White).

- Finally, The Analytical Writing Assessment (AWA) designed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) as a test of analytical writing, has been instituted as a regular part of the Graduate Management Admissions Test and is strongly supported by MBA program administrators (Rogers & Rymer, 1995). The AWA requires the test takers to compose a complete piece of writing and measures sentence- and word-level language skills.

Business communications teachers can develop grading guides for writing assignments similar to the AWA scoring guides which outline the following criteria for measuring effective analytical writing skills: critical analysis of the issue or the argument, development of support through reasons and/or examples; organization of the material logically; facility in language (for example, syntax, diction), and control of the conventions of standard English (grammar, usage, and mechanics). In this way, teachers can better prepare students for the kind of evaluation they will encounter when applying to postgraduate programs.

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Developing Grading Guides

Based on the research of Cooper and Odell (1977) and others, teachers can construct (1) skills analysis grading guides and/or (2) holistic scoring guides that will enhance prewriting instruction, guide students during the rewriting process, and facilitate objective and constructive evaluation of the written product.

- **Skills Analysis Grading Guides**

The teacher first determines the specific writing skills he/she intends to emphasize for a particular assignment.

For example, if students are writing a "bad news" business letter, the teacher may instruct students to (1) use the indirect (inductive) method of development; (2) use active voice and careful pronoun reference; (3) write short, clear, and concise sentences and paragraphs; (4) follow correct letter form; and (5) use appropriate grammar, spelling, and punctuation. These criteria are listed on a grading guide with the numbers 1 (low) to 5 (high) following each criterion statement. When giving prewriting instruction, the teacher explains each criterion that is new to the students, giving examples, etc.

Next the teacher tells students that the letter will be evaluated solely according to the 25-point criteria on this guide. The teacher should direct students to refer to the guide after they have composed a rough draft of their letter and consider each criterion as they rewrite a final draft.

Finally, the teacher evaluates each letter according to the criteria on the guide. The problem areas are indicated on the students' papers, and the teacher scores the corresponding criteria from (1) low to (5) high.

- **Holistic Grading Guide**

The teacher determines the general characteristics of quality he/she wishes to assess. For example, if students (employees) are to write a brief memo/report in which they inform the reader (the manager of the department) about a problem that exists in the department, the characteristic of quality can be described as "the ability to make plain or intelligible a situation which is not known by the reader."

The teacher constructs the following scoring guide which unambiguously defines various levels of proficiency using a 6-point scale:

Level 6 (Excellent): Papers in this category shape the facts into a highly structured, intelligent statement. All of the material is pertinent, necessary to an understanding of the situation. The material is concise, yet comprehensive, covering all of the major areas of the problem. The writer has provided specific examples, details, and/or explanations. Punctuation, grammar, and spelling are correct according to standard written English.

Level 4 (Acceptable): Papers in this category are accurate and clearly stated. Eighty percent of the material is pertinent and covers most of the major areas of the problem; however, these papers lack specific examples, details, and/or explanations. Spelling, grammar, and punctuation are 85% correct.

Level 1 (Unacceptable): Papers in this category present information that is not accurate or present information in such a way that it might easily be misunderstood.

Even experienced writers often need help in detecting and diagnosing text problems (Schriver, 1990). Although time-consuming to construct, Skills Analysis and Holistic Guides help student writers learn to detect and diagnose their own problems. These guides also facilitate specific, focused instruction while avoiding the pitfalls of harsh, subjective, and unfocused criticism. They help the business communication teacher provide the kind of classroom instruction that can eventually enable students to become business writers who "...express ideas in a lively, authoritative, and original way" (Blake & Bly, 1991).

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